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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between the educational philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters of England. The paper describes the intellectual and political climate of 18th century England, the Dissenting movement, the Dissenting academies, and Wollstonecraft's associations with the Dissenters. During the 1600s and 1700s, religious and political issues were inseparable in England. The Dissenters opposed the British government and the Anglican Church for constitutional and religious reasons, insisting on the "authority of Scripture." Restricted from Cambridge and Oxford, Dissenting academies were formed that integrated secondary and university education. The academies featured a focus on the practical application of knowledge, a broad curriculum, freedom of inquiry, and self-expression. The Dissenting movement, in their protest of oppressive social structure, paved the way for Wollstonecraft's literary effort to emancipate women. Wollstonecraft challenged the prevailing ideology regarding the intellectual and moral inferiority of women and advocated the provision of comparable educational and professional opportunities. Like the Dissenters, she recognized education's role in cultivating reason and fostering virtue, and argued against institutions that perpetuated the economic, social, and political subordination of all humanity. Wollstonecraft believed that all sexes and classes should be educated together in class periods that lasted no longer than one hour, and that physical exercise, sex education, and the humane treatment of animals be integrated into the curriculum. She argued for the formation of a national education system, which was an extension of the Dissenters' philosophies regarding natural rights. An implication is that the role of educators today is to stimulate critical inquiry and social action based upon reason in pursuit of the virtuous society. Contains 12 references. (LMI)

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Schooling, The Dissenters, and Wollstonecraft

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The intention of this paper is to determine the relationship between the educational thought of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters of England. This examination addresses the climate of eighteenth century England, the Dissenting movement, the Dissenting academies, and Mary Wollstonecraft's associations with the Dissenters.

Eighteenth Century England.

Charles Dickens' quote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," suitably depicts the conditions of Mary Wollstonecraft's England. This typification is significant, for the primary writings of Wollstonecraft, like that of Charles Dickens, address societial ills.

The eighteenth century is illuminated as the Age of Reason and the Age of Revolutions. Removing the veneer, one finds the setting of Mary Wollstonecraft's life quite different. Eighteenth century England suffered a high birth and mortality rate. The 1750 population numbers 10.5 million, with an average death rate of 1:21. The 1750 population was 10.5 million; yet by 1780, when Mary Wollstonecraft was twenty-four years old, England's population had increased to 11.5 million. Seventy-five percent of all infants born in London alone died before five years of age. (Carswell,1973; Cole & Postgate, 1949).

Living conditions for the lower classes living in urban areas were extremely poor, with rampant filth, sewage, and overcrowded conditions. Diet primarily consisted consisted of oatmeal, wheat, and potatoes. Milk and meat were unaffordable since they cost more than a workers' weekly earnings. Spirits were considerably cheaper than tea, which was two hundred times more costly (Carswell,1973; Cole & Postgate,1969).

British society was highly stratified, with a growing middle class comprised of government workers, clergy, tradespeople, and royal household administrators earning from 10-100 times more than the teachers and lower class farmhands and laborers. School teachers earned a third less wages than clergy and the farmhands' and laborers' weekly earnings averaged one shilling. The same salary scale was in existance for decades after 1750. Only in 1790 did wages for craftsmen and workers increase to 3 shillings a day (Carswell, 1973; Cole & Postgate, 1969).

Despite the growing interest in natural law and positivism brought on by the Enlightenment, religious issues continued to dominate eighteenth century British thought. Obscurantism was a popular movement during the Enlightenment within the British class structure. Schooling was considered detrimental to the lower classes, since it would alter one's destiny. Obscurants believed schooling would result in peasants considering themselves too good for farm labor (Maynes, 1985). Hence, education was limited to those who had financial means for maintaining the status quo.

Overcrowded conditions in urban areas like London contributed to many skilled craftsmen living with their employers and families. These living conditions blurred the distinction between the two classes, since they often worshiped, ate, and socialized together. The development of factories and powerdriven machinery altered this relationship by subjugating the skilled craftsman with the unskilled laborer, thus widening the chasm between the classes. It was these skilled artisans who became Dissenters (Carswell, 1973).

The Dissenters

The origins of the Dissenters reside in the Puritans of the 1600s. Considered as left wing Protestants who opposed government for constitutional and religious reasons, the Puritans wanted to reform the Church of England from within, returning it to biblical principles and not monarchial decrees. In an era when one's faith was an outward sign of one's political and social attitude, the Dissenters were driven from the Anglican Church.

By 1661, most of the Dissenters were banished from all public and political offices in England because of their refusal to take an oath of loyality to the King, renounce their religious belief, and take Communion in the Church of England which was in accord with the newly established Clarendon Code. The succeedings years worsened for the Dissenters with the passage of the 1662 Act of Uniformity requiring clergy to assent to everything in the Book of Common Prayer. Almost two thousand ministers in England were labeled as Non-Conformists and coerced to leave their parishes. The passage of the Schism Act in 1711, though not strongly enforced, required all teachers to be licensed by Anglican bishops and teach nothing but the Anglican catechism. With each level of oppression, more dissenters fled England, many to the New World. Some of the more prominent Dissenters who remained provided the seed of the Whig Party of England (Smith, 1946). By 1698, there were over 250,000 Dissenters in England (Carswell, 1973).

Perhaps the most insiduous theological aspect of the Dissenters was their insistance upon the "authority of Scripture," which places the formal principle of authority outside of the church and state, thus leaving judgments in these matters to the individual or congregation. The Dissenters, unlike the Anglicans, did not view New Testament writings, such as Romans 13, supporting the state's authority. They tended to attract people experiencing political or economic alienation in England. Hence, growing industrialization created displacement fostering the adoption of Dissent as a means of retaliation (Carswell, 1973).

It is extremely important to understand that religious and political issues became inseparable for the Dissenter. Sermons and pamphlets more often reflected identification with the oppressed than evangelistic concerns. Bradley (1990) suggests that:

> "The coherence between the sermons and the socioeconomic divisions indicates Non-conformists were not merely fighting old battles but anticipating modern values. This kind of preaching, sometimes pro-American, was considered radical, but nonetheless extremely influential throughout the British electorate. In fact, by

> the mid 1760's, the Dissenters, reflecting upon the experience of the American colonists, established lobbies, such as the Dissenting Deputies, to gain repeal of what they considered to be unjust laws (p.18)."

For a time the state church tried to hold the Dissenters in check by decreeing that only Anglicans could be school teachers. This and other restrictions on non-Anglicans were possible because the Toleration Act of 1689, granting separate worship rights, did not override the Test and Corporation Act which permitted the Anglican domination of education and politics (Speck, 1993). However stratified British society was, it was not to the point of a revolution. In fact, Dissenters had opportunity to vote, petition, serve in the government, and give expression to their beliefs (Bradley, 1990). There was no suppression of the growing Unitarianism so that Mary Wollstonecraft's belief in a God of perfect reason flowed quite naturally in a society already permeated with religious options.

In the 1750's many Dissenters were abandoning the teaching about the Trinity, that God is one, but in three persons. They claimed an innate dignity and goodness for human nature, denying original sin and the need for the subsitutary atonement of Christ. This branch of the Dissenters became known as Unitarians and admitted to the possible perfection of human nature (Carswell, 1973).

The Dissenting movement, in protesting oppressive social structure, paved the way for Wollstonecraft's literary effort to emancipate women. The Enlightenment thinkers, surprisingly enough, championed the rights of most suppressed groups except women. Even such luminaries as Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Napolean, and Kant all upheld the subordination of women (Anderson & Zensen, 1988).

The critical nature of the Dissenters served to spawn allied social movements of the period. On the eve of the American Revolution, Dissenters

were agitating for the abolishment of all hinderances in church and government disqualifying them from full British citizenship (Carswell, 1988). Numerous Dissenters were supportive of the French Revolution and sought to expose what they considered oppressive social and political structures in France and England. Tom Paine's Rights of Man, and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress served as the foundational texts of the English workers' movement from 1790 to 1850 (Silver, 1975). Paine emphasized the role of reason in human affairs, a strong theme of Mary Wollstoncraft's Vindication of the Rights of Man (1790), which she wrote in response to Edmund Burke's attack on the Dissenting minister, Dr. Richard Price. The work of Thomas Hardy helped literate workers to become more self-educated and politically active Popular and neightborhood reform groups proliferated (Silver, 1975).

Dissenting Education

Education comprised the strength of the Dissenting movement, whose membership was already 250,000 by 1698 (Carswell, 1973). The Restoration of Charles II and the Conformity Act of 1662 forced the Dissenters into the execution of educational projects. Responding to its citizens' perceptions of the moral and societial dangers of the Industrial Revolution, Sunday schools became popular in dissenting communities (Silver, 1975). After the passage of the Toleration Act restricting schooling and admission of Dissenting youth into Cambridge and Oxford, dissenting schools and dissenting academies proliferated. Dissenting schools were traditional schools which resembled charity schools of the era. Dissenting academies which integrated secondary and university education, differed in theory and practice from the traditional British universities (Parker, 1969; Silver, 1975).

The Puritan Samuel Hartlib is responsible for the spirit of the dissenting academies. Puritans of seventeenth century England were highly critical of the prevailing model of education, considering it worthless and impractical for their

needs. Believing that Bacon's principle of "observation" via the use of the senses as the true way of learning, the Puritans were serious about educational reform. Since they believed that anyone could learn if aided with the right methods, they wanted to incorporate the use of senses in the learning process. The Puritans believed that education needed to be useful and appeal to the professional, commercial, and middle class (Parker,1969).

Hartlib, a merchant who was highly interested in educational and social reform, brought his friend John Amos Comenius to England in 1641. The Civil War hindered Hartlib's intention of building a college in London where Comenius' theories of universalism, usefulness, and realism could be implemented (Parker,1969).

In 1644 Hartlib motivated John Milton, author of Pilgrim's Progress, to write his views on the academy, which Milton conceived as integrating secondary and university levels (Parker,1969). This model integrating Milton's, Bacon's, and Comenius' theories were established in Dissenting communities.

Dissenting academies did not require an oath of doctrine for admission to their liberal institutions. Dissenters' belief in liberty of conscience and a free liberal education resulted in many Anglicans attending the academy since the British populance considered it superior to Oxford or Cambridge. This is evidenced in the Lord Chesterfield's recommendation to his son to attend a Dissenting Academy instead of Oxford or Cambridge University (Parker,1969).

Even though the major focus of the seventeenth century Dissenting Academy was the preparation of its clergy, a general curriculum was offered to serve those interested in business and other professions. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and navigation were necessities for safeguarding the church, as well as serving the Dissenters who were merchants, clerks, and sailors. Students could

specialize in law, medicine, or theology at Sheriffhales Academy. The Dissenting academy in Taunton offered the first business curriculum in 1672 (Parker, 1969).

Since its inception, dissenting academies incorporated the use of scientific instruments as part of the curriculm. Courses offered at the early dissenting academies, such as Newington Green, which Daniel Defoe, founder of the modern novel attended, included Latin, Greek, Hebrew, logic, math, French, Italian, geography, and history.

Since the Dissenting Academy's focus was on realism, its curriculum adapted with modernity. Hence, English became the required language for lectures and writing. Modern languages, history, and contemporary geography began being taught as well as hydrostatics, mechanics, physics, anatomy, astronomy, and contemporary English writings (Parker,1969).

Dissenting Academies utilized instructional methods considered "radical." Since student understanding was premier, lectures were carefully prepared from a multiplicity of sources and presented in modern English. This contrasts sharply to the traditional British universities, whereby instruction was presented by directly reading text in a classical language. Inquiry followed lecture at the dissenting academy, providing students greater opportunities for critical analysis. Numerous debating societies developed from these activities, since freedom of inquiry and self-expression was highly encouraged. Parker (1969) writes, "Discussions, which were a natural consequence of a belief in an appeal to reason played an important part in the academies. The aim was to cultivate sound judgment rather than impart knowledge (p. 25)."

Practice exercises followed all lectures, requiring student application of knowledge, such as essay writing, dissecting, or surveying land. Since the philosophy of the Dissenters was "all students could learn," tutoring was

conducted nightly at many academies for those students having difficulty (Parker,1969).

Dissenting academies were autonomous in broading their curriculum. Numerous science courses, mechanics, hydrostatics, physics, anatomy, astronomy and English essays were taught in the Dissenters' quest for a more realistic education. As the eighteenth century evolved, it became common for contemporary geography, history, geometry, English, and modern languages to be taught. It became common for dissenting academies to have teachers of various opinions and specializations.

Dissenting minister and teacher Joseph Priestley was a contemporary of Mary Wollstonecraft. Priestley, who was Mary Wollstonecraft's neighbor in Newington Green (George, 1970), is primarily noted for discovering oxygen, sulpher dioxide, and nitrous oxide. Internationally renowned, Priestly was an advocate in adapting the curriculum for developing the mind to deal with the complexites of modernity. He promoted this philosophy at the dissenting academy in Warrington where he taught, and in his writings, especially the Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life (1765) Priestley recommends the schooling of lay dissenters and broadening the curriculum to include geography and the language, history, politics, and laws of England. Maps, travel books, and geography were used as aids in the instruction of classics. Students were encouraged to use their native language when writing .

Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in April, 1759, to Edward and Elizabeth Wollstonecraft in Epping Green, outside of London. She grew up in an impoverished household under the domination of an abusive, violent father who did not hesitate to uproot his family frequently while squandering his inheritance on failed business attempts (Brody,1985).

In 1774 Edward Wollstonecraft moved his family to Hoxton, outside of London. It was here where Mary Wollstonecraft began her close associations and life experiences with Fanny Blood and the Dissenters in her quest for knowledge and independence. Both Hoxton and Newington Green, whereWollstonecraft opened a school for girls in 1784, had dissenting academies. Newington Green was home of her mentor Dr. Richard Price; the Clares, who first taught her; the widow James Burgh, who loaned her money; her neightbor, Joseph Priestley, and Reverend Hewlett, who introduced her to the publisher Joseph Johnson (George, 1970; Brody, 1985).

It was Joseph Johnson, a prominent publisher of radical and dissenting authors, who provided Mary Wollstonecraft the opportunity to become the first independent woman writer. He provided Wollstonecraft friendship, financial means, and intellectual growth. She was included in his circle of friends who met weekly above his bookshop to discuss politics, religion, and other sundry topics. It was here where Wollstonecraft encountered the radical minds of Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, William Blake, Thomas Paine and William Godwin.

Mary Wollstonecraft is primarily known within feminist circles as author of Vindication of The Rights of Woman (1792), which is a political treastise arguing for emancipation of women on moral and ethical grounds. Yet, Wollstonecraft's first recognition came in Vindication of the Rights of Man (1790), which challenges the prevailing ideology of the divine rights of kings over the inherent rights of man. Vindication of the Rights of Man, written in support of Dr. Richard Price, maintains the Dissenter's conviction in civil and religious liberty by replacing the governing aristocracy with a "dominion of reason and conscience," since the former ursurps man's natural rights (Brailsford, 1949).

Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) is the first rational extension of the Dissenter's argument to embrace women. Mary Wollstonecraft is the first to

theorize that women have been denied the inherent rights of liberty and freedom because of their inability to reason, which she attributes to a deficient education. She challenges the prevailing ideology regarding the intellectual and moral inferiority of women and advocates the provision of comparable educational and professional opportunities. This would foster the ability to "reason" thus empowering women's active participation in the cultivation of virtue and improve the social order.

It must be recognized that both Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters were products of the Enlightenment. Hence, belief in empiricism and natural law was pervasive; and disbelief in the supernatural disallowed.

Egalitarianism permeated the ideology of the radicals William Godwin, Richard Price, and Thomas Paine. Thomas Paine wrote in defense of women and the abolishment of slavery (Brailsford,1951). Godwin, in Political Justice (1793), like Wollstonecraft, in Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), addressed the corrupting power of society on the development of character.

Dissenting ideology is prominent in the writings of Wollstonecraft, who criticized slavery in the New World and championed the French and American revolutions. Wollstonecraft, like Paine, Price, and Godwin, espoused a virtuous republic based upon the principles of egalitarianism whereby property holdings would not impede an individual's economic gains and independence.

Wollstonecraft did take this argument further to embrace the inherent rights of her own gender, whom she considered oppressed and lacking in virtue because of the inability to reason. Wollstonecraft, like the Dissenters, recognized education's impact in cultivating reason which addresses society's ills by fostering virtue. And like the Dissenters, Wollstonecraft argued against institutions perpetuating the economic, social, and political subordination of all humanity,

including women, and perceived education as the apex in creating this new world order.

Wollstonecraft's premise that man, not nature was to blame for society's pervasive conditions, aptly depicted in Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a Dissenting belief. So too, is her proposition that the development of reason would foster virtue through man's enlightenment of his error. Wollstonecraft's semblance with dissenting beliefs is acknowledged in her reasoning. Personal enlightenment led to Wollstonecraft's inclusion of her own gender within the confines of dissenting ideology.

Affinity in the educational philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters' primarily can be made through the examination of Wollstonecraft's and Joseph Priestley's educational writings. Irene Parker's (1969) The Dissenting Academies in England (1969) is an excellent source on the history and practices of dissenting academies.

Wollstonecraft, like her contemporary Priestley, advocated a broad curriculum which fostered critical thought and sound judgement to cope with society's complexities. Both recommended incorporating the senses and the practical application of learning and courses like history, philosophy politics, science, classical and modern languages. Like Priestley, Wollstonecraft recomending the use of demonstrations. The incorporation of the senses and the conceptualization of knowledge instead of rote memorization was primary to both Wollstonecraft's and the Dissenters' instruction. Freedom of expression fostered through inquiry and lively discussion was encouraged by the Dissenters and Wollstonecraft.

Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft attributed failures in education to the autocratic and demanding natures of teachers who disregarded the well-being and motivational aspects of learning. The Dissenters, Godwin and Wollstonecraft

discerned the crucial role of education in the development of the just society by the formation of intellect and virtue.

Since Wollstonecraft's intellectual development was awakened by her Dissenting friends and associations, the similarity in thought is not extraordinary.

The originality in Wollstonecraft's educational philosophy resides in her premise that all sexes and classes should be educated together; class periods should last no longer than one hour; and physical exercise, sex education, and the humane treatment of animals should become integrated in the curriculum. Wollstonecraft believed in the formation of a national system of education. She also emphasized that no sedentary learning activity should last more than one hour and encouraged role playing of situations which children would encounter. It is within this context that I base my premise that Wollstonecraft's writings are an extension of the the Dissenters' philosophies regarding natural rights and schooling to embrace her own sex.

Implications

The Dissenting influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's contemporaries pervades her philosophical writings. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters perceived action as the intemediary between reason and virtue. The skilled artisans of eighteen century England acted by adopting the Dissenting ideology towards schooling as the means for regaining their rights and position in British society which had previously removed them by the changing climate of the Industrial Revolution. This theme of demarginaliziation continues today as governments and societies grapple with ideological issues and civil rights in a pervasively conservative environment.

My contention is that the Dissenters and Wollstonecraft wanted to advance the cause of human rights through the revolutionary process of education

against oppressive socio-political forces. The Dissenters did not hesitate to challenge authority and the status quo if they perceived it unjust and necessary.

This raises serious questions for contemporary society in regards to the process of schooling and social action. Are we as educators providing students opportunities for critically questioning the prevailing ideology, or are we simply giving students answers framed by the constraints of society? Are we willing to challege the dominant ideology of the status quo regarding de facto segregation and inequity thus preserving the inherent rights of humanity? Virtue for the Dissenters and Mary Wollstonecraft required action based upon reason in their quest for the virtuous society. Reclaiming this virtue returns honor to what we educators are and what the institution may become.

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